

Awareness That Doesn't Suffer

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For those of you who may have come after the little brief talk I gave at 10:15, I like to think sometimes that there are only two kinds of practitioners. There are beginners and experienced beginners. And sometimes we all have the same experiences; it's just that we relate to them differently.

So, for example, every time you sit down to meditate, your little toe hurts. Or every time you sit down to meditate, you immediately think that you're a terrible meditator, and you know everyone else's meditation is perfect, but you're an embarrassment to the meditation world. So, something like that every time. And maybe, as a beginner, you just believe it all. That little toe hurts and probably needs to be amputated, or this is the beginning of the end. Or your mind makes all these stories, and by the end of the meditation, you're more tense than when you started. And if you're a terrible meditator, you know that you spend the whole meditation kind of spinning in those stories.

Someone who's experienced might have the same things, but they don't do anything with it. They just, "Oh, look at that. There it is. It's happening. This is normal for me. It seems like every time I meditate, this is what I do." I don't have to do anything with it. I can just let it be. I can just see it and know it and let it be there, and not have to react or pick it up.

And it's okay. It's a world of difference between the person who picks it up and struggles with it and believes it and hates it, and the person who has it—these things happen—and it's, "Oh, this is how it is." I know how to be present for this. I know that if I just kind of be mindful of it and hold it gently, that it tends to go better.

As practice continues and practice deepens, at some point there are these important milestone phases in the practice where we understand something new that gives us a whole different perspective of how to practice. Rather than seeing, "Oh, my little toe hurts every time

I sit down,” and, “I don’t have to do anything with it. I don’t have to make up a story about amputation. I don’t have to react to it. It’s just an aching toe, and my life goes on fine without it, without being concerned with it. I’ll just hold it spaciously.”

But at some point, the feeling of a spacious awareness, a clear experience of not clinging or reacting to anything, becomes so impactful, so clear, so like, “Wow,” that it occurs to you that this can apply to everything. Not just little toes hurting, not just the particular thoughts, but everything. Wow. I can—I mean, I can just not cling, and things are easier. I can just have a spacious awareness. I can bring it with me, or I can discover it and be with it this way.

It’s still—I’m still having beginner’s experiences. Someone once said the mind has no shame. And so, you know, the mind kind of—all kinds of things the mind will produce and do and think, all kinds of experiences life will bring you. Maybe you do get gangrene in your little toe someday. Maybe it has to be amputated.

But now you know. You’ve had this clear enough feeling, kind of wake up to a spacious mind, a mind that doesn’t cling, that the doctor says, you know, “It’ll tell us to go,” and you say, “Oh, okay. Are you sure? Should I get a second opinion?” “Yeah, you can if you want.” “Okay, I will.” But, you know, that’s a wise thing to do. But it all unfolds in the spacious mind, this broad mind, this non-clinging mind.

So at some point, this idea of not clinging, not grasping, not holding on to stories, making up more stories about it all, and living in a fantasy world about it all, is much more compelling than clinging. It’s much more compelling than making up stories and imaginations of imaginary futures without your toe, or whatever it might be. It’s just so good. It’s so healthy to not be caught in all that stuff.

And so there are kind of milestone experiences that, “Wow, I really—I think now I believe that this is a—not only believe—I know this is a good way to be.” Easier to believe it’s useful, to believe in it, to have faith in it, than to do it. But now, “Oh, now I know. This is really clear to me. And I’ll live accordingly, or I’ll live with that as a reference point.” I can’t always do it, but when I can’t—when I can’t do non-clinging, if I can’t do this spaciousness—let me just not cling to that. Let me just kind of have faith. I have faith in the practice. I have faith this is possible.

As opposed to unconsciously having faith in the fear around the story, around the little toe, or having faith in the judgments that I’m a bad meditator. The things we have faith in are quite sad, very debilitating at times. But to have the faith shift to something healthy is really good. So, to have this whole other orientation.

And so one of the ways that that's done in this practice is to understand that how we are mindful is as important as what we're mindful of. It might actually be more important: how we're mindful in a spacious way, how we're mindful with a non-clinging way, how we're mindful without zeroing in on the ideas of what it is, the perceptions of what it is, but hold it in that wider, more spacious, relaxed kind of clarity that might know what it is. But it's all kind of living there in this broader way.

So sometimes I talk about this as, you know, one way to find this, move in this direction, is when you're mindful of something, have the mindfulness be calm. Calm mindfulness. You're welcome to be not calm. Please, if you need—if you're not calm—that's no problem for this practice.

Provided you find a way where you have the ability, the choice, to let the mindfulness, the knowing, the recognition of the agitation, that you can know it calmly. You find the fortitude, the inner strength, to try to experiment. "Where do I find—how do I do this? I'm completely agitated. But Gil says, you know, this calm mindfulness. What can I do? How can I do this?" How can you use mental noting so that you can—

Mental noting is like speaking. Most of us adjust our speech based on what's happening in the environment. And if you go into a kindergarten room where all the kindergarten kids are napping—preschool—it's pretty natural to lower your voice. Calm, speak calmly in there. A friend who's agitated, you speak calmly with him. So can you find some way to have calm mindfulness?

The other way, and I like to talk about this, is: can you be aware of your suffering with what doesn't suffer? That part of you that doesn't suffer, that part of your awareness that doesn't suffer, can that know the suffering? So both can coexist. And not many people don't know that, and they think, "Well, they suffer. That's just pure, perfect, just complete suffering."

But what we learn through this practice is that it's a mind with suffering. It's an awareness that's calm, awareness that doesn't suffer, that's aware of suffering, rather than us identifying with suffering, believing it, caught in it. So how can you be aware of suffering with what doesn't suffer? Easier said than done, but maybe it's easier to understand to be aware of suffering with an awareness that's calm, calm awareness of suffering.

But to know what is not suffering, that's one of these milestone moments in this practice. "Oh, now I can see I'm suffering, but it's clear, so clear, that it's that which doesn't suffer that's aware of it. Wow, that gives me a lot of faith. That gives me a lot of inspiration. That shows a whole different way of being alive. Who would have believed that?"

So, and then to finish, when you know that these milestones of practice, of really having your faith, that your belief is so strong now, you really have faith in the value of a spacious awareness, a calm awareness, an awareness that doesn't suffer to meet the suffering, to meet the agitation, to meet it all, to be with it, then you might still have a beginner's experience. And you can still be a beginner, but now you're an experienced beginner. So that, you know, you're not different than anybody except that you can hold it in a nicer way.

You still have all the same—at least a few of us, we still have all the same odd things. Some of us are odd, but we can hold it lightly and spaciously and with greater freedom and with greater wisdom. So I hope that's meaningful for you. If it's not meaningful, you're completely welcome to leave what I said here. You don't have to take it with you. So we're going to do some cleaning.